

---

Theory U: A Book Review

EADU 8610 Fall 2010

Dr. Khalil Dirani

October 26, 2010

John Blake

Joan Bush

Mandy Williams

Constance Kasputis

Nadra Hunter

Nicholas Crapo

Susan Polite

Greg Armstrong

Robert Eichenberg

Eudora Baltram

Betsy Zint

Scharmer, C.O. (2009). *Theory U*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.

## Overview of the Chapters

### *Part 1: Coming to the U*

Scharmer's book *Theory U: Leading from the future as it emerges*, takes the reader on a journey of self-discovery and challenge, evaluating a new model of change thinking which powerfully incorporates established theories with a unique blend of individual and organizational framing. The book begins with a heart-wrenching story from his childhood of watching his house burn down. This was the foundation of learning about the opportunity to be unique rather than defined by his things or surroundings.

He elaborates the concept of the journey in the next chapter and directs leaders to examine their "'inner condition', the inner place from which they operate" (p. 27) before they can move through the U process, which is a field theory, not a linear, mechanical process. Incorporated in this "inner condition", is the concept of social technology based on the three Qs: IQ, accessed through an open mind, EQ, accessed through an open heart, and SQ, accessed through an open will.

Beginning in chapter three, Scharmer explains that the systemic issues of institutions are merely reactionary responses to change or the need for change. He notes four levels of processing change and learning: reaction and response (level 1), redesigning the existing structure or process (level 2), changing thought patterns (level 3), and (level 4) where he first introduces presencing, the ability to link directly with one's highest future potential. As a result of level 4 learning, he recommends that we abandon our conventional operating methods and "bend our habituated beam of attending to the world and redirect it onto its source—the blind spot from which we operate moment to moment" (p. 56-57). Only by doing this can we tune into future emerging.

In chapter four, Scharmer explains that organizational change has increased in complexity due to a shift in the approach to change. Dynamic and social complexity focused on planned change has emerged as disruptive change. Consequently, leaders cannot predict future trends based on experience but must focus efforts on engaging all organizational members for ideas to sustain the future of the company.

The challenge with change today is not restricted to organizations and leadership, because there are serious "blind spots" in society as a whole fueled by a "decline in integrative awareness and thinking" (p. 103). Change in the world today is affected by newly evolving arenas of social media, the ever increasing globalization of every aspect of business, as well as, the rise of the importance of the cultural and spiritual aspect of the work environment. Ken Wilber's "all-quadrants, all-levels (AQAL)" (p. 102), referenced in chapter five, is a framework that embraces those global drivers, and integrates three levels of society (I, We, It) with nine levels of developmental consciousness. This holistic model provides "universal grounding" no matter what the environment was in the past or what it may look like in the future.

Systems theory has changed over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century from a linear, explicit knowledge model to one where knowledge is embedded and situated in context. In chapter six, Scharmer charges philosophers and systems thinkers to delve deeper into life, and to understand not just how something is, but why it is. It is not enough to simply know of something, but to truly love and want to understand what is happening in and around us. Systems thinking must move from the its' origins to a more feeling, situation based experience that touts that to truly know something you must love it.

Threshold situations are experiences that enable us to change how we feel about something, specifically allowing ourselves to deepen our perception of a situation. Scharmer describes his threshold moment as the interim when the door began to open between his old self and his emerging future self. He acknowledges that not everyone will make the cross-over of one's own threshold, but organizations that do not achieve this will remain on one side (current state versus future state) in a state of mediocrity.

### ***Part 2: The breakdown of the U process***

The place where we begin the U process is downloading. This is simply the collection of information for face-value. It is filled with negative habitual actions of repetitious behaviors which create barriers to an open mind. Transitioning from downloading to seeing involves clarifying intentions, learning to listen, engaging the concept of wonder, and creating space for dialogue. To continue the journey, the next step is sensing, which involves becoming reflective and intuitive towards the situation. In this shift, "the boundary between observer and observed collapses and the observer begins to see the system from a profoundly different view: a view that includes himself as part of the system that is being observed" (pg. 147). In this stage, the foundational key is the embrace of concrete thought leading to grasping the situation and beginning to sense with the heart what is happening.

The next step is by far the most powerful for Scharmer: presencing. It means "to connect with the Source of highest future possibility and bring it into the now" (pg. 163). It is a free space, non-judgmental, and a place of open will and full acceptance. In a group context it is unity of Self (defined as our best possible self) and Work (defined as our ultimate purpose). Only once this state is achieved can the next step of crystallizing happen. This is the stage where we begin to take our new found focus to two unique wills: the small will and the grand will. The small will is shared, deeper intention and the grand will is the action. From this action, the stage of prototyping creates opportunities to explore, experiment, and receive feedback in a small-scale setting. This stage requires three types of intelligence according to Scharmer: "the intelligence of the head, of the heart, and of the hand" (pg. 205). This means there is a practicality, a continued connection to the purpose, and the action to make it happen. Maintaining connection to the inspiration, the feedback, and other models at this stage is ultimately extremely important.

The final stage of the U is performing. This is the final integrated piece of complete action and embrace of the purpose and the action. It requires three unique axis of evaluation for

organizations, including the current value, the innovative and learning value, and the social context value. Scharmer's theory presentation throughout this section of the book is clear, well-supported, and undoubtedly built upon years of experience, thought, and feedback from others.

### *Part 3: The implementation of the U*

Scharmer reiterates presencing as the most powerful stage of the U when he describes the implementation of the U method. He says to "lead profound change is to shift the inner place from which a system operates" (p.377). This practice of social technology revolves around individual, conversational, organizational, and global actions.

First, Scharmer lays the foundation for how individuals perceive and explain change by giving the reader language and terminology to define the change. Without descriptive terminology, discussion often becomes vague and confusing around change and social systems. He successfully defines perceptions around attention, point of view, inflections, movements, instruments, enemies, and fundamentalism and dimension around social system change. This is "the grammar of the social field" (p. 231).

As individuals, we all experience downloading, but it is at the point of seeing, or not seeing, that we can move toward presencing, or spiral into the "dark space of absencing" (p. 263). The story of Hitler's secretary portrays this kind of de-sensing and self delusion that epitomizes the downward U. "Real thinking" is when we can connect with others, and what they are thinking and feeling and escape our "mental models." This is how one rises to the fourth field, presencing.

Chapter seventeen explores the U from conversational fields of downloading (autistic systems) to debate (adaptive systems) to dialogue (self-reflective systems) and ultimately to presencing (generative systems). Scharmer says that "conversations connect us to the power of collective intelligence" (p. 298). Although as human beings, we aspire to this kind of connection, the reality is that we are in a destructive pattern and we are doing our children a disservice, and consequently the future world, by addressing symptoms of an unhealthy environment instead of attacking the root cause.

Chapter eighteen speaks to organizations opening their boundaries to the wider constellation of players: the whole surrounding ecosystem; customers, users and communities at issue and seeing the system from that place. It highlights the four fields of attention within an organization and the source of power at each of the four fields. In addition, the various types of institutionalizing and coordinating needed based on the "geometry of power" are referenced. Developmental issues and dynamics that companies face as they evolve from a centralized to a decentralized structure are a foci point and tips are given in the chapter to enable an organization to successfully move from one field to another. Scharmer points out that success depends on the capacity to sense emerging opportunities and to let go of old identities and structures.

Scharmer expands on this notion of organizational movement to global actions which are dominated by the co-dependence of three sectors: socialist systems (state), theocratic systems (spiritualists), and economic systems (business). Throughout chapter nineteen, he illustrates the

relationships among these sectors in the conversational fields of downloading, debating, dialoging, and presencing. Next, he uses the U method to demonstrate the progression of these sectors to collective innovation, and contrasts their regression toward annihilation and social dehiscence. In other words, the foundational structures of both capitalism and democracy must transform to the next stage of global economy by “seeing and acting from the whole that connects players and stakeholders that need each other to take their system into its best future” (p. 347). Otherwise, the current system is doomed to collapse.

By being able to catch “social reality creation in flight”, a person is able to “experience the I-in-now” (p. 355). Scharmer highlights the fifth level of systems thinking, the meta level, and invites the reader to explore the field structures of autistic, adaptive, self-reflective, and generative systems in chapter twenty. Following his analysis of the four fields, Scharmer implies that if cause is understood, shifts are attainable. He illustrates this in a model of four concentric circles, each representing a field. As an individual or system moves to the interior of this circular framework, patterns become more visible, the system sees itself, people start operating from future possibilities, and real change is possible.

The final chapter, twenty-one, gives the practitioner a collaborative process which reflects the theoretical framework of the U: co-initiating (seeing), co-sensing (sensing), co-presencing (presencing), co-creating (prototyping), and co-evolving (performing). Techniques to apply these “movements” are mapped in detail for the change agent to learn from the future as it emerges. The journey of the U is a profound shift in thinking, communicating, structuring, and performing as an individual, an organization, and a world.

## **Critique of Theory U**

### ***Positives & Strengths***

*Theory U* provides the reader Scharmer’s ability to truly integrate his uniqueness to previously embraced and proven frameworks, creating a powerful connection with the reader. Integration of previous theoretical foundations included Schein’s work with cultural studies, which integrated the concept of the levels of awareness (artifacts and behaviors to values to underlying assumptions) into the U process. The clearest embrace is seen at the underlying assumptions level which is where the act of presencing happens. The second clear embrace is of Senge’s widely regarded system’s thinking. From in introduction of the book on, it is clear how Scharmer embraces the ideas which speak to each person actively being a part of larger system, and yet playing a distinctive and unique role in its success.

Another hugely successful aspect of this book is Scharmer’s use of diagrams for clarity and explanation. The multi-layered perspective approach of the U theory allows the learner to understand this framework from multiple unique views. These include individual responsibility, leadership responsibility, movement, stages of development for organizations, and the foundational levels of change just to name a few. Each of these allows for greater understanding, discussion, and ultimately the embrace of this theoretical framing.

In relation to the previously mentioned diagrams, Scharmer also does an exquisite job of presenting “presencing” and his framework for a variety of audiences. Individuals and organizations on all levels are given not only diagrams and discussion, but unique illustrations, questions, and framing which pertains to their unique situation and necessity of *Theory U*. This is significant to yet another strength of this book, namely the incorporation of individual responsibility within the context of the organizational impact. As mentioned, *Theory U*'s direct connection to systems thinking directly implicates the individual in the organization change process by calling the individual out for the “seeing, sensing, and presencing” stages of the process. Only once personal and collective presencing is achieved can there be dynamic and true change.

Scharmer's experience and knowledge cannot be questioned, and is foundational to the credibility of this book. The wide use of examples from personal experiences, from organizational encounters, and from in-depth interviews all beautifully weaves into a tapestry of excellence and conviction to the pertinence and value of this framework.

### ***Weaknesses***

*Theory U* is a profoundly powerful book for the field of organizational development. However, there are areas which lack clarity as to this framework. The first is the lack of clearly addressing how the pursuit of presencing will be more readily possible for certain individuals over others. There is the discussion of the three potential for the “Voice of Judging,” “Voice of Cynicism,” and the “Voice of Fear” which could block the progression to the deeper level, but very little discussion about the impact of one's innate ability to embrace this deeper state of consciousness (pg. 42). Greater discussion should be dedicated not only to learning about the presencing, but perhaps the attempted-yet-failed presencing by those individuals who lack such perceptive abilities.

Also, in the book there are powerful examples throughout the writing. However, an overuse of conversation and interviews in comparison to scholarly connectivity leaves the desire for the counterpoints for the positioning. Little is mentioned of the perceived omissions of this theory. Without the scholarly review of this theoretical framework, a potential disproportionate support base of story and conversation to scholarly, historically proven and documented framework leaves the reader questioning the validity in historical and currently supported framework.

Throughout the book, *Theory U* calls upon the reader to experience a “Higher Power” of presencing. The author is clear in his sense of meditation, and eastern religious framing as he discussing these spiritual issues. The meditation or spiritual focus, objectional or confining as it could potentially be understood faces a greater issue: The embrace of the organization to such thinking. In a world of political correctness and caution surrounding religion and mysticism, Scharmer embraces this as the foundation of the language. With his use of capitalized words for many descriptions of the presencing level, there is little doubt as to his perceived values for this level of comprehension or awareness.

The final weakness to a widely powerful and revolutionary writing in the organizational change and development genre is Scharmer's lack of addressing measurable results to this framing. Understanding that this is a theory offers some grace to this issue, however with the multitude of stories, their descriptions end before the tangible, measurable, quantifiable benefits and profits were addressed. Though I don't doubt they are possible, direct results are always necessitated in a field marred by the lack of calculated and measurable results. Evaluation is a foundational step in the change process, and in business the bottom line still rules.

### **Conclusion & Reflection**

Scharmer has laid out a powerful combination of theoretical history with a profound spin of "presencing." The U framework fundamentally will empower the next generation of strategic change, organizational change, and organizational development consultants. Its clear desire for the deepest level of understanding and change leads the reader to embrace the processes of seeing, sensing, and presencing in a new way to create a crystallizing to guide to a prototyping to obtain true performance change.

The quality and depth of this book is clearly its strength. The real life examples and the esteemed scholars who share in regards to this framing leave little doubt that this will be a foundational cornerstone to expand the current boundaries of the organizational thinking. As an author, Scharmer clearly doesn't shun previous theories; rather, he compiles the valuable pieces of each to present a clear unit of new thinking from initial theories. Scharmer's Theory U is defined as a phenomenon; it is a frame-work and language; and it is a methodology assisting in the operation of working from this deeper place. The desire of this book is to drive us to a deeper sense of our personal understanding of our Self (our greatest potential) and our Work (our ultimate purpose). It is hard to read this book and not respond in an open manner. Now we, as the organizational specialist must reach (and truly facilitate the reaching) for the open mind, the open heart, and the open will.